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Do the Painful Things First

Before I became an entrepreneur, I went to business school. While studying for my MBA, there was one lesson that I learned which has proved to be useful over and over again in my life.

I was sitting in a marketing class and we were discussing ways to design a wonderful customer experience. The goal was not merely to provide decent service, but to delight the customer.

Behavioral scientists have discovered that one of the most effective ways to create an enjoyable experience is to stack the painful parts of the experience early in the process. Psychologically, we prefer experiences that improve over time. That means it's better for the annoying parts of a purchase to happen early in the experience. Furthermore, we don't enjoy it when painful experiences are drawn out or repeated.

Here are some examples...

- If you're at the doctor's office it's better to combine the pain of waiting into one segment. The wait will feel shorter to your brain if you spend 20 minutes in the waiting room rather than spending 10 minutes in the waiting room and 10

waiting room rather than spending 10 minutes in the waiting room and 10 minutes in the exam room.

- People enjoy all-inclusive vacations because they pay one lump sum at the beginning (the pain) and the rest of the trip is divided into positive experiences, excursions, and parties. In the words of my professor, all-inclusive vacations “segment the pleasure and combine the pain.”
- If you’re a professional service provider (lawyer, insurance agent, freelancer, etc.) it is better to give the bad news to your clients first and finish with the good news. Clients will remember an experience more favorably if you start weak but finish on a high note, rather than starting strong and ending poorly.

These examples had me thinking...

If you can make a customer experience more delightful, why not make your life experiences more delightful? How can you take advantage of the way your brain processes painful and annoying experiences, and use that knowledge to boost happiness and live a better life?

To Boost Happiness, Stack the Pain

A delightful customer experience combines the painful experiences into a single segment that occurs early in the process and then improves over time. If you want to increase your happiness and have a more delightful day, you can do the same thing.

Here is an example...

On a normal day, you might have something annoying or painful to do (like paying

the bills). And you also might have something good happen to you (like a friend sending you a thoughtful email).

If you read the email on your lunch break and then pay the bills when you get home from work, you will remember your day as going from a good experience to a bad experience. That's the opposite of what you want.

However, if you decide to stack the pain early in your day — for example, if you pay your bills in the morning before you go to work and then read the email from your friend on your lunch break — you will remember your day as going from bad to good. As a result, you'll feel happier because your brain likes it when experiences improve as time goes on.

This same principle can be applied in dozens of ways throughout your day.

- When you're working on a project, cleaning the house, or doing homework, start with the task that you dislike the most. Once that is out of the way, your experience will improve and you'll finish with a more satisfied feeling. (For more on this, see [The Only Productivity Tip You'll Ever Need](https://jamesclear.com/productivity-tip) (<https://jamesclear.com/productivity-tip>) and [The Ivy Lee Method: The Daily Routine Experts Recommend for Peak Productivity](https://jamesclear.com/ivy-lee) (<https://jamesclear.com/ivy-lee>)).
- When you're trying to start a new habit (<https://jamesclear.com/habits>), combine the pain of starting into a small segment. For example, in this article (<https://jamesclear.com/good-habits>) I discussed how one woman eliminated the pain points that prevented her from exercising consistently. By reducing the pain she felt at the beginning, it was more likely that she would follow through.

- When you go to the gym, start with the exercise you dislike the most. With the hardest exercise out of the way, your experience will improve throughout the workout and you'll be more likely to remember your workout as positive. And when you remember your workouts as positive, it's more likely that you'll show up next time and workout again.

Stacking the Pain for the Long-Term

It's easy to worry about making the right choices with your life. However, if you choose to pursue things where the pain of the experience is largely in the beginning — like building a business, losing weight, or creating art — then you will tend to look back on those experiences fondly because they improve over time.

By comparison, doing things like trying to beat the stock market or become a professional gambler are very inconsistent. They can provide big wins, but they can also provide big losses at any time. The pain isn't necessarily in the beginning. Because of this, these experiences are less likely to make you happy over the long-run.

Of course, that can be easy to forget when you're struggling to succeed with other goals. In the beginning, it can be easy to feel like, *“Building a business is so hard, why shouldn't I try to beat the stock market?”*

Understanding this difference can help you stay on track and continue to master your habits even when the day-to-day grind gets frustrating.

- It might be painful now to put in the work required to get in shape or become a better athlete, but as your skills improve over time you'll remember the experience as a positive one.

- It might be painful now to create bad art, but as you master your craft and your work gets better you'll remember the experience as a positive one.
- It might be painful now to battle through the uncertain early years of entrepreneurship, but as you learn to build a stable business you'll remember the experience as a positive one.

Choosing to front-load pain and discomfort isn't just a choice that applies to daily tasks and errands. It can also be used to nudge you toward the goals you have that you tend to procrastinate on.

Where to Go From Here

If you're anything like me, you want to get to the end of your life and remember it as being joyful and happy. Given what we know about behavioral psychology (<https://jamesclear.com/behavioral-psychology>), we are more likely to remember our lives as happy if they improve over time.

This is one reason why working through the pain of learning new skills for your job, training to become stronger and healthier, and putting in the time required to master your craft is worthwhile. In the beginning, you may feel stupid while learning a new skill or frustrated while sacrificing current pleasure for a future payoff, but when you make the choice to go through the pain early, you get to enjoy the benefit of delight later on.

The path to a delightful life looks a lot like the path to a delightful customer experience. It starts off with a few painful experiences and improves over time. Using this strategy allows you to move toward happiness even when there are

annoying or painful things you have to get done.

All the more reason to stop procrastinating (<https://jamesclear.com/how-to-stop-procrastinating>), get the bad experiences out of the way early, and take on the hard stuff now.



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With each donation, AMF distributes nets to protect children, pregnant mothers, and families from mosquitos carrying malaria. It is one of the most cost-effective ways to extend life and fulfills my bigger mission to spread healthy habits and help others realize their full potential.

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